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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: March 6, 2009

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State Agricultural Officials Kick Off Massachusetts Maple Month

SHELBURNE – Marking the start of the maple sugaring season, Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (DAR) Commissioner Doug Petersen joined local farmers and town officials today in Shelburne at an annual springtime ceremonial tree tapping to celebrate March as Massachusetts Maple Month.

Maple sugaring season is the Commonwealth's first agricultural harvest of the year. Commissioner Petersen read Governor Patrick's proclamation declaring March as Massachusetts Maple Month.

"We're pleased to celebrate the beginning of the Massachusetts harvest season with maple sugar producers, who are stewards of an important Bay State agricultural tradition," Commissioner Petersen said. "DAR business training and Buy Local programs support farmers across the state helping them produce high-quality products that bolster local economies and give generations of residents and visitors the chance to taste the best of each season."

During the morning event, Commissioner Petersen, state agricultural officials, members of the Massachusetts Maple Producers Association, and local farmers tapped a sugar maple tree, hung a sap bucket and toured Gould's Sugarhouse. In operation for more than 150 years, Gould's, a family-run maple sugar producer, specializes in maple products including candy, fudge and syrup.

"Maple farmers not only represent a great New England tradition, they also make tremendous contributions to our economy and our way of life," State Senator Stan Rosenberg said. "I'm pleased that Commissioner Petersen has chosen to kick-off Maple Month in western Massachusetts."

More than 300 Massachusetts producers annually produce 50,000 gallons of maple syrup, valued at \$3 million. Maple producers – most of whom operate west of Worcester – employ more than 1,000 workers. Each sugaring season, 60,000 tourists spend more than \$1.5 million at maple farms, restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, country inns, and other attractions in farm communities. With its swaths of maple groves, the industry preserves more than 8,000 acres of Massachusetts as open space. Of the 11 major maple-producing states, Massachusetts ranks eighth.

Cold nights and warm days are required to get sugar maple sap flowing. Once sap is harvested, farmers boil it down in evaporators to produce syrup, which is prized as a topping for pancakes and waffles and as an ingredient in a wide array of recipes from salad dressings to desserts.

Through DAR's Farm Viability Enhancement Program, DAR officials are working with maple sugar producers on production innovations to save energy and cut costs. Typically, maple production, which is both labor and energy intensive, requires 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of pure maple syrup. The program has helped several farms to purchase reverse osmosis equipment that reduces the water content of maple sap, thereby reducing the amount of energy needed to produce syrup. DAR is studying other energy efficiency and conservation techniques for the industry, including new evaporator designs and heat recovery technologies for pre-heating and de-watering sap.

For more information about the Farm Viability program, visit <http://www.mass.gov/agr/programs/farmviability/> .

Last month, the DAR awarded a \$25,000 grant to a South Deerfield community organization, Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, to help increase agricultural product sales for farmers, promote regional agricultural products such as maple syrup, and encourage consumers and businesses to buy local produce. (Can we name the community organization?)

For information about state funded Buy Local programs and Massachusetts grown products, including maple sugar, visit <http://www.mass.gov/agr/massgrown/> .

For information about March maple events at Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) parks, visit <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/events/maple.htm> .